

ORIGINS OF WORDS AND PHRASES

The derivation of words and phrases we use in conversation is an interesting study. There are a number of sources on this and the explanations are often at variance. The entries below are taken from the *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* by William and Mary Morris.

FINE FETTL. “In *fine fettle*” means “in good health and spirits.” It comes from the old English *fetel*, meaning “belt” and refers to the generally healthier feeling one has when properly belted, ready to take on all comers in battle.

TO THE BITTER END has nothing to do with bitter in the usual sense but was originally a nautical phrase. Aboard ship, a *bitt* is a post in the deck around which cables and ropes are wound. The ends of these ropes which are nearest the *bitts* are the *bitter ends*. If the anchor cable were let out *to the bitter end*, the ship would be much more subject to misfortune and possible shipwreck. Hence, the phrase came to mean “to the very end” or even “until death.”

TOUR DE FORCE comes direct from French and means “feat of strength or skill.” It is pronounced too-duh-FORSS.

GALOSHES – which sounds like an item from hillybilly dialect – actually comes direct from the royal courts of the French monarchs. In the days when shoes were made of silk and other kinds of cloth, *galoches*, which were a sort of wooden sandal, were worn to protect the shoes on wet days. Over the centuries these wooden clogs were transmuted into the rubber overshoes we know as *galoshes* today.

SOWING WILD OATS. *Wild oats* are tall weeds similar in appearance to oats but relatively worthless. So a person *sowing wild oats* would be planting a worthless crop, just as a young man does when he fritters away his time in fruitless dissipation.

OBFUSCATE. (Pronounced ob-FUS-kayt or OB fus-kayt) has its origin in the Latin *ob* (to) plus *fuscus* (dark) and one of its meanings is “to darken.” By extension it has come to mean “to obscure, confuse or stupefy.”

LOVE APPLES. Tomatoes were once known as *love apples*. Apparently some of our forefathers thought tomatoes were aphrodisiac, but that represents a distinct triumph of mind over matter, for science tells us that as a love potion tomato juice simply doesn't have what it takes. The whole idea comes from a mistake in etymology. Tomatoes originally grew in South America and were imported to Spain not long after Columbus discovered America. From there they were taken to Morocco and eventually were introduced to Italy, where they were known as *pomo dei Moro* (apple of the Moors). A romantic Frenchman mistakenly translated this as *pomme d'amour* (love apple) and a legend was born.

GIBSON. Credit for naming this version of the martini, in which an onion or two substitutes for the olive, goes to Charley Connolly, long the master barkeep at New York's famous *The Players*. The story goes that Charles Dana Gibson ordered a martini, Charley found himself temporarily out of olives, substituted a tiny onion – and the *Gibson* was born. Gibson himself, of course, was the preeminent magazine illustrator of the early part of the 20th century.

GIFT OF GAB. We all know people who have the *gift of gab*, the ability to discourse freely and fluently, if not always wisely, on any and every topic. The expression is apparently of Scottish origin, *gab* meaning “mouthful” or “mouth” in that dialect. However, a case can be made for *gab* as a back formation from *gabble*, “meaningless chatter.” The latter comes into English from a Middle Dutch word, *gabbelen*.